

The Mill in the Bible

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Older scholarship tended to argue that the watermill was the product of the Middle Ages – while this position is no longer strictly true (although the windmill certainly *is* a medieval invention—fig. 1), we can say that the watermill's use was intensified throughout the millennia from 5000 to 1500. Mills came to be seen as the principle symbol of European power and skill, as well as being invaluable for economic, technological, and practical necessity. In this same period, the single most influential text for the western world was undoubtedly the Bible. Although the connection between the two is not impressively close, there are a number of intersections that allow us a glimpse of the mill in the Middle Ages from an atypical perspective.

The images in this essay are all details from images in the [Bibliothèque Nationale](#) in Paris. Please click on each image for the full image and its description page (and click 'notice' there for full information)



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Millstones

In setting down various rules for behavior in Deuteronomy 24, including such actions that may appear surprising to the modern eye such as explicit sanction for divorce and remarriage (Deut. 24:1-4), it is written that “No man shall take the nether or the upper millstone to pledge: for he taketh a man's life to pledge” (24:6). The Biblical authors recognized how crucial grain and milling was to survival (especially in the arid near east - it could literally 'taketh a man's life') and therefore prohibited anyone from holding another's upper millstone 'hostage' as a 'pledge' or surety for a debt.

Judges 9 tells the story of Abimelech the 'son of Jerubbaal' who campaigned against numerous people, defeating towns like Shechem where he fully destroyed the city. However, when he came against the city of Thebez (Thebes), he was able to take the city, but a strong tower holed up inside the city. The men and women of the town fled into the tower and held up there, while Abimelech tried to burn the door of the tower. At

that point, “a certain woman cast a piece of a millstone upon Abimelech's head, and all to brake his skull” (9:53). The millstone hit Abimelech, but it did not kill him immediately “he called hastily [to] his armour bearer, and said unto him, ‘Draw thy sword, and slay me, that men say not of me, A women slew him.’ And his young man thrust him through, and he died” (9:54). [The story is repeated in 2 Samuel 11:21 as a parallel for the death of Uriah the Hittite.] What is amazing, and what speaks of Abimelech's strength was that the millstone did not instantly kill him. Most millstones weigh hundreds of pounds. The Gospels recount one sermon of Jesus where the massiveness of the stones is called to mind: “But whoso shall offend one of these little [children] which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2).

Quite beyond the weight of the massive stones, the Bible also in one place mentions that they were seen as a measure of solidity: In describing the Leviathan to Job, God said “His heart is as firm as a stone; yea, as hard as a piece of the nether millstone” (Job 41:24). While the intent of the metaphor is clear, it raises an interesting question about differential durability of millstones. In the European Middle Ages and the American colonial experience, at any rate, the bed stone and runner stone were always of the same stone. But since Job is told that the Leviathan's heart is as strong as the nether bedstone [1], it raises the interesting question of whether in the ancient world the top and bottom stones were of different material.



Figure 4: 13th-century south Italia MS; at the bottom there is an inscription “molendina babilonie”



Figure 5: The Fall of Babylon

In various Biblical stories, millstones seem to symbolize civilization itself. In one threat to Jerusalem, Jeremiah reports that the Lord will bring Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, against them to “take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones, and the light of the candle. And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment” (Jeremiah 25: 10-11). The millstones themselves symbolize prosperity and the sound of comfortable living, for which they will pay. On the other hand, the mills of Babylon itself were renowned the world over for their magnificence, contributing to that city’s prosperity (fig. 4) [2]. Indeed, when the city is destroyed, it is said that,

a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone, and cast it into the sea, saying, Thus with violence shall that great city Babylon be thrown down, and shall be found no more at all. And the voice of harpers, and musicians, and of pipers, and trumpeters, shall be heard no more at all in thee; and no craftsman, of whatsoever craft he be, shall be found any more in thee; and the sound of a millstone shall be heard no more at all in thee; And the light of a candle shall shine no more at all in thee; and the voice of the bridegroom and of the bride shall be heard no more at all in thee (Revelation 18:21-23). (fig. 5)

In an earlier description of the enslavement of the Babylonians, the “virgin daughter of Babylon” is told to sit in the dust, without a throne, reminding this “daughter of the Chaldeans” that she shall “no more be called tender and delicate.” She is then ordered to “Take the millstones, and grind meal: uncover thy locks, make bare the leg, uncover the thigh, pass over the rivers,” emphasizing her bondage to mundane activities (Isaiah 47:1-2).

Mills

And all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first born of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the firstborn of the maidservant that is behind the mill; and all the firstborn of beasts (Exodus 11:5).

In describing the rapture, Jesus said that “Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.... And [Noah] knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come” (Matthew 24:34-42; Luke 17:35 refers to “Two who are grinding [*duae erunt molentes*]). This image of two women grinding at the mill found its way into art of the later Middle Ages.

The only other reference to mills is in the story of manna from heaven, and there it is only noted: “And the manna was as coriander seed, and the colour thereof as the colour of bdellium. And the people went about, and gathered it, and ground it in mills, or beat it in a mortar, and baked it in pans, and made cakes of it: and the taste of it was as the taste of fresh oil. And when the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell upon it” (Numbers 11:7-9).



Figure 6: The Fall of Babylon

The importance of the mill and the miller is noted in numerous passages. Ecclesiastes 12:3-4 comments that “In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders (*molentes*) cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened. And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding (*vocis molentis*) is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low.”

There is also the story of Samson being held prisoner. Samson was a prisoner of the Philistines who “took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house.” (Judges 16:21) It

is presumed that he was made to turn a mill to do that grinding – a humiliation at doing the work of an ass (Fig. 6).

Notes

[1] This phrasing is from the King James version (Job 41:15 due to different transcription) - in the Vulgate, the second half of verse 24 reads "et stringetur quasi malleatoris incus", which means, roughly, "and is drawn tight like a hammerman's anvil". This discrepancy would be interesting to further examine.

[2] see D. J. A. Ross, Nectanebus in His Palace: A Problem of Alexander Iconography, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 15.1/2 (1952): 67-87.